

# GRANDMASTER

WARREN MURPHY & MOLLY COCHRAN



US/42205-9 • A PINNACLE BOOK • \$3.95  
CAN/43195-3 • \$4.95



# GRANDMASTER

WARREN MURPHY  
& MOLLY COCHRAN

PINNACLE BOOKS



NEW YORK



*For Sondra O. and the  
folks who live on the hill*

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**GRANDMASTER**

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An original Pinnacle Books edition, published for the first time anywhere.

First printing/October 1984

ISBN: 0-523-42205-9

Can. ISBN: 0-523-43195-3

Cover art by Stephanie and Mark Gerber

*Printed in the United States of America*

**PINNACLE BOOKS, INC.**

1430 Broadway

New York, New York 10018

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## PROLOGUE

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Somewhere a bell faintly tinkled. The room was as large as a castle courtyard, lit by clusters of tall scented candles in each of the four corners, but the ceilings were so high that no light reached there, and looking up gave him the feeling of staring up at a dead sky, on a night without stars.

Figures scurried by along the base of the walls. Their movements were soft, and although he could see only shadows, he knew that they were women.

Three feather-filled cushions, each of them eight feet square, were piled atop each other in the center of the room. A woman lay on the cushions, and he knew, without knowing, that she was the one he had been summoned to see.

He hesitated, but the woman beckoned him forward with a slow movement of her graceful arm. She was naked but for a golden chain wrapped three times around her waist. As he drew closer he could see that her hair was black and long, pulled forward over her left shoulder so that it draped across her breasts. Even in the dim candlelight, her hair glistened like oiled glass and her eyes seemed made up of thousands of individual amber crystals, each of them reflecting the light from the candles in the room. Closer to her, the scent of incense was stronger, almost overpowering. He drew it deep into his lungs and felt warmth radiate from inside him.

He stood now in front of the cushions, his knees almost touching them, looking down at the woman. Her body was as artfully arranged as an old master's composition; though she



was naked, the placement of her hair and the shadows that darkened her made it impossible for him to see her clearly.

"Do you know why I have had you brought here?" she asked him in Russian. Her voice was musical, its pitch exactly the same as that of the bell that still tinged softly from one of the far corners of the room. He breathed deeply again; his body felt as if it were losing its muscles; he wondered if she had spoken or if he had merely imagined the bell was speaking to him.

She was looking at him, waiting for an answer. He tried to speak, but no words came. He shook his head.

"Because you belong to me," she said softly. Her eyes never left his face.

Belong to her? No. No one belonged to anyone else. He summoned up his will and again tried to speak. This time, with effort, he forced the words out. "Madam, I . . ."

She ignored him. "From the day of your birth, you have belonged to me."

"And if I do not so choose?" he said thickly. He was surprised that he had been able to speak the words; speaking was such an effort.

"The choice is not yours," she said, a hint of annoyance tingeing the smooth, throaty sounds. "You are only a man. Do not forget that. You are limited by your senses, your mortality. But I will make you more than a man."

She paused as if awaiting an answer, but he could no longer speak. The very presence of the woman seemed to obliterate his sensibility and reason. He wanted only to be invited to lie down with her on the soft cushions, to rest his body and his aching, confused mind.

"You are my chosen one," she said. "I have searched the earth for you."

He stared at her, unable to tear his eyes away from her shadowy face. "Why?" he asked softly, feeling cold. "Who am I to you?"

A smile flickered around the edge of her mouth. "In all things there is opposition, reversal. Yin and yang, light and darkness, good and evil. In those beings of power, there are also two sides. Do you understand?"

He drew a deep breath to try to clear his mind, but instead his lungs were filled again with the sinuous fire of the incense. This place was somehow infused with magic, he knew, power-

ful magic. Lapping around the borders of his consciousness was fear. The woman was soft and dark and smooth and rich as dreams, but there was no comfort in her for him.

"Is there someone who will come to this place?" he asked.

"Someone to challenge me, perhaps? An evil man . . ."

The woman's smile broadened into a coarse, harsh laugh that resounded through the room.

The man did not understand. He waited for her to explain, but instead she rolled over onto her back without speaking. Suddenly her body came alive, breasts thrust forward, the dark curled hair between her legs sharply visible in the candlelight. She was holding something in her hands. It was a snake fashioned out of gold, long and curved into an S. Its scales were meticulously carved, its mouth open with its tongue darting out as if it sensed danger.

She placed it between her legs and drew it slowly between her thighs. Her eyes deigned to meet his. "Come to me," she commanded.

He came.

She held the gold snake up to him. Its luster seemed to grow in intensity, hurting his eyes. He feared the snake.

"Take it," she said.

Trembling, he accepted the carved serpent. It burned his hands. His very soul seemed to gasp at the contact.

"An evil man has already come," she purred. Her voice licked him with promise. "The Prince of Death has come. *My* evil man."

He closed his eyes. He understood. "My goddess," he said.

She placed her silky hands on top of his. At her touch, his fear of the snake's power vanished. With a sigh, he snapped the golden serpent in two.

"Yes," she said softly into his ear, filling him with a deep, perverse lust that he realized he had longed for all his life. She had been right: He had no choice. His destiny was to serve her, to drink her magic, to live in spheres high above the scrambling and rutting of common men.

"My Prince of Death. You have the seeds of greatness in you. I will make those seeds bloom, my prince. And you will kill the golden snake for me."

"I will," he promised.



Then she opened to him and wrapped her body around his and, as the bell still faintly tinkled and the air grew heavier with the scents of incense and carnality, she took him into the depths of his own darkness.

Book One

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***THE COILED SNAKE***



Book One

THE COILED SNAKE

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## CHAPTER ONE

The dock on Pihlaja Island was deserted, as it always was in Helsinki's black early mornings. The patrolman yawned and checked the luminous face of his wristwatch. It was an hour before dawn. Just another ninety minutes and he would drag his chilled body home and bury it in the warmth of his wife.

He heard a faint scratching sound behind him and he wheeled, his right hand slapping down toward his heavy leather police holster, but then he relaxed as he saw a solitary wharf rat running down the middle of the wooden dock.

He smiled grimly, faintly embarrassed at his display of nerves. The *punkkarit*, the local hoodlums, had everybody frightened. Each day, the newspapers carried stories of their plundering raids, and all the members of the police's tiny dock squad had been warned to be extra watchful while on duty. Moored ships could be a paradise for vandals and burglars.

The patrolman's footfalls echoed heavily along the bleak wharf. His breath blew out in clouds. Soon all the harbors in the Gulf of Finland would be closed with the first ice. In the distance a sleeping tanker sent tubes of yellow light over the black gulf. Nearer, tied up to the condemned section of wharf where the policeman walked, another vessel rocked silently on the water. It was a fishing boat, sizable but ancient, a black, empty hulk without even an identifying name on its transom. He walked toward it. The boat was obviously abandoned, although he had never seen it before.



Suddenly, behind him, the numberless rats housed in the decayed pier house set up an indignant chatter and scattered in all directions. The policeman turned toward the source of the noise, a thin line of sweat rising across his forehead. *Punkkarit?* Here? He pulled his night stick out of his belt as he approached the low stone building.

But it wasn't the kids with their Mohawk haircuts and snapping switchblades. He cursed softly and smiled with relief at the dim figure crouched against the crumbling facade of the pier house. The man was asleep. He was dressed in a ragged sailor's jacket and a pair of filthy trousers. Under his head was a tattered old duffel, which the man used as a pillow.

"Hey, what's this?" the officer said in Finnish, prodding the man with his toe. The vagabond snorted awake and strained to focus his eyes on the policeman. "Get moving. You can't sleep here."

He repeated the command in Swedish. The man stirred slowly. "And take your things. You won't be coming back." He pointed at the duffel with his night stick.

The derelict obeyed. He brought himself to his feet shakily. Then, shivering, he dragged the ragged canvas bag away from the wall. He looked up at the officer with watery eyes.

"Well, go on," the policeman said, gesturing with his head toward the end of the dock. The man padded away softly, his back bent. The officer watched him go, then walked back to the black boat.

He stepped carefully over its mooring lines and scanned the vessel with his flashlight. Over the place where the ship's name normally would have been, a black-painted board hung suspended from two hooks.

That was odd, he thought. It was as if someone had purposely concealed the identity of the old hulk. He leaned over the pier, reached out with his stick, and lifted the board. For a moment the name *Kronen* gleamed in white letters against the black crupper. The policeman straightened and let the board fall back against the vessel with a slap. He moved farther along the pier, the beam from the flashlight moving in a straight line along the length of the craft. He stopped, looked at the boat again, and shook his head in puzzlement. Why would anyone try to conceal the name of a boat? Unless the boat had been stolen.

He reached behind him and pulled his small mobile radio from the leather holder on his belt. Just before he depressed the button, his neck snapped backward and his spine lurched with a painful blow from the rear. The flashlight hurtled out of his hand into the water below, and the radio dropped onto the wooden dock with a muffled thud.

"What . . . what . . ." the policeman groaned, buckling to his knees.

He twisted his head and saw the hobo standing above him, looking completely different from the boozy tramp he had chased from the dock. The man he saw now was as blankly efficient as a machine, avoiding the policeman's eyes as he yanked him to his feet.

"No, please," the policeman began. But by then the knife in the hobo's hands was already singing upward.

The officer gasped once, his eyes bulging in shock as the blade tore into the left side of his throat and sliced up to his right ear. His hands struck out, jerking wildly, as if they had been electrified. His feet skidded. A stream of bubbling blood hissed out from his neck, forming a cloud of vapor in the cold air as it shot forward in an arc. His head fell back on the hobo's shoulder.

Silently, four black-clad men appeared on the deck of the black boat. The *Kronen's* engine roared to life. Keeping his head down to avoid the stream of blood, the hobo hoisted the body and heaved it into the gulf. The policeman's lifeless face, still bearing an expression of horrified surprise, shimmered near the surface for a moment.

The boat was pulling out. The hobo kicked the policeman's radio into the water, ran back for his duffel, tossed it on deck, and leaped after it. He caught hold of a rail and pulled himself on board as the *Kronen* sped out of the harbor.

His knife and the right side of his face were bathed in blood.

The captain relinquished the wheel to a crewman, then turned and stared without expression at the blood- and sweat-soaked man who stood before him, as if trying to decide whether or not to allow his visitor to remain on board. His face, dark and windburned around intelligent eyes that seemed incapable of surprise, held traces of both contempt and amuse-



ment for the man with the duffel who waited silently for his verdict.

"I'm only a smuggler, you know," the captain said finally, his English lilted with Scandinavian cadences. "Killing police is not part of our contract."

The man didn't answer. A heavy drop of perspiration rolled unnoticed down his face, streaking through the caked blood on his cheek. The muscles around his jaw were clenched tightly.

"Ah," the captain said with disgust and jerked his thumb toward the cabin below.

With a ragged sigh, the man hurried down the companionway.

Below deck, he stood in the small main cabin, alone, rubbing his arms to ward off the sudden chill that always came over him after moments of great fear. With some surprise, he noticed that the knife he had used to kill the Finnish policeman, a Bundswehr combat model, was still clenched in his fist. He unclasped the hand with effort, and the Bundswehr clattered to the floor. Its outline was imprinted on his blood-encrusted palm. He stooped over to pick it up, rinsed it off under the saltwater tap of the sink, dried it carefully, and replaced it in his coat pocket.

How long? he thought as he washed the brown film from his hands. He was forty-four years old, the oldest active field agent he knew. How many more border runs could he make before his nerve gave out completely? How much terror could a man stand in his life? He closed his eyes to the salt sting of the water as it ran over his face and head.

He dried himself on a rag remnant of a towel and, still shivering, sat down at the cabin's rough plank table. From his duffel bag he removed a watertight plastic pouch, which he opened and emptied onto the table. He had already checked everything in the pouch three times, but the difference between three times and four times someday might be the difference between living and dying.

He nodded silently as he checked the bag's contents in the dim light of the single oil lamp. There were two well-forged Finnish passports for a husband and wife. There was a Russian identity card with his own photograph on it and a set of Russian work papers. There was a fully loaded Swiss Hammerli eight-shot pistol. Inside a slim manila envelope was two thousand dollars in American money, an unimpressive amount

of Russian rubles, and his American passport under his true name of Frank Riesling.

Enough, perhaps, to get him into and out of Russia with his two illegal passengers. Certainly enough to get him killed if he was caught before he reached Moscow.

But all this for a chess player?

He thought momentarily of the dead policeman, and his hands trembled. He bolted from his place at the table and ran to the small ship's head in the rear of the cabin where he vomited into the stained, smelly toilet. A policeman murdered? For a chess player? Was it worth it?

As he sat again at the table and began scooping the contents back into the black plastic pouch, he knew he would have to try to sleep, despite his jangled nerves. He had not slept the night before, and the journey ahead was a long one.

The Finnish fishing boat would take him to Hamina, near the Russian border. Then Saarinen, the captain, would send two of his three crewmen to take Riesling northward, overland, on a route that ran west of the Russian city of Vyborg.

Directly north of Vyborg, they would leave him, and he would be on his own. The trip into Vyborg itself was going to be a bitch without sleep, he knew. On foot all the way, which was rough in October, even with the help of a corrupt old border patrol guard who averted his eyes in return for a healthy bribe and got to secretly stick it to his superiors for busting him from a posh posting in Leningrad to serve out his commission in the frozen provinces.

If he managed to cross the border and if he managed to avoid the KGB agents on spy-catching duty in Vyborg, then he would have a train ride into Leningrad and an hour's flight to Moscow. The chess player, whose name was Kutsenko, and his wife were supposed to be ready to leave Moscow immediately. The three of them would go back the way Riesling had come. In Hamina, they would board Captain Saarinen's fishing boat and be on their way to Stockholm.

All right, he thought. It had started out badly with the policeman, but it was manageable. Riesling had made the trip a dozen times.

But never before, he thought bitterly, on such short notice. Never before without first getting advance approval from headquarters. Was he right to go? Was he right to chance it?



Stubbornly, he pushed the questions out of his mind. Two hours to Hamina.

He looked longingly at the small bunk across the cabin as Captain Saarinen entered, a grease-smudged bottle of Koskenkorva vodka in one hand. In his other hand was the remains of a large, toothmarked *makkara* sausage, and he gave off its fumes as well as those of French Gitane cigarettes, which he smoked constantly, insisting that the dark brown tobacco, unlike the "blonde" used in American cigarettes, was healthful for the human organism. Somehow, it seemed not to have done anything healthful for his chronic cough.

As soon as Saarinen walked through the doorway, Riesling rose automatically, and his hand darted toward the pistol inside the plastic pouch. When he saw it was the captain, he peered past him toward the small companionway behind.

"Sit down, sit down," Saarinen said with annoyance. "There's some trouble, but nothing to do with the business back on the wharf." He lit a blackened candle lamp on the table. The light cast huge shadows on the grease-spattered wall.

"What, then?" Riesling asked coldly.

Saarinen gestured to Riesling's empty chair with his chin and pulled a cracked mug from behind the sink. "You," the captain said, his dark eyes now twinkling like a satyr's. "I have brought you on this run for many months, yes? I do not even know your name, and yet I know you like a brother. And like a brother, I worry for you. Always nervous, always expecting the worst. That is your way, but you will drive yourself to sickness, my friend." He splashed some vodka into the mug and took a swig from the bottle himself.

"You agreed to take me to Hamina," Riesling said stubbornly.

Saarinen sighed. "Hamina, yes. But I do not think my men can take you to Vyborg."

Riesling reached into his coat and produced a thick envelope filled with currency. He slid it along the tabletop toward Saarinen. Wordlessly the captain hefted the envelope and stuffed it into his pocket. "Enough for Hamina," he said.

"What trouble?" Riesling asked quietly.

Saarinen poured a long draft into his mouth and exhaled noisily. "The Russians have doubled up on their Finnish

border patrols," he said. "Your friend in Vyborg has been removed."

"The old man at the guard station?"

Saarinen nodded. "Shot."

"What about you?"

"The ship's running empty," Saarinen said. The *Kronen* had made a tidy fortune for Saarinen by illegally transporting food and small machinery to Russia and its satellite states. His three crewmen, all experienced smugglers, carried the goods into Soviet bloc countries and sold them at highly inflated prices on the black market. Only one of his band, Saarinen claimed, had ever been stopped by the authorities, and that man had been killed on the spot, leaving Saarinen's lucrative business to thrive undetected.

Riesling, like Saarinen, entered and left the Soviet Union frequently for illicit purposes, but the goods he smuggled were people. Scientists, scholars, the occasional military defector—people who would never be permitted to leave Russia alive—had been guided by Riesling to the West. It was this mutuality of purpose that had brought the American agent and the Finnish criminal sailor together in a symbiotic no-questions relationship that had lasted for the better part of two years.

"Is Vyborg the only place with reinforcements?" Riesling asked, trying to hold down a rising panic.

"Everywhere. All the border entries except in the far north. And that's useless. It has already been snowing heavily for weeks everywhere north of Kuhmo."

Riesling swallowed. "Why do you think . . . ?"

The captain shrugged his meaty shoulders. "There's a new premier in Russia, and I expect the KGB is trying to make an impression so he doesn't fry their asses." He shrugged again. "It'll wear off before long."

"Christ," Riesling said under his breath.

"Even the run to Hamina is a danger now. Gogland is crawling with secret police. You'll see when we pass."

Riesling rose and went to the small porthole on the starboard side of the cabin. Gogland Island, a Russian outpost square in the middle of the Gulf of Finland, was not yet visible in the foggy dawn light.

"They won't stop us," Saarinen explained reassuringly, cutting a thick slice off the sausage with his pocketknife.



"The *Kronen* is a fishing vessel registered in Helsinki. We are permitted in these waters." He stuffed the meat into his mouth and chewed noisily. "If not for you, there would be nothing extraordinary about this trip at all. We would have passed Gogland in any case."

He washed the meat down with a long drink of the Koskenkorva. "But Hamina is too far for an ordinary fishing boat from Helsinki. This time, we will blame the sea for taking us so far off course or the drunkenness of the captain," he said with a laugh. "But we will not make this trip again. Not until the Russians have decided once again that losing a few of their countrymen to the West is not worth the effort at the borders, eh?"

Riesling looked at him sharply. How much did the man know?

"Take it easy," Saarinen said. "I would have to be blind not to notice that the passengers with you on the return route were all Russians. The boots, the clothing. Even their breath is Russian. Russians smell bad. Don't insult my intelligence."

He took another drink and wiped the spillings from his chin on his sleeve. "Anyway, I don't care. I have not led a blameless life myself. But the difference between us, my friend, is that I have no government behind me, as you do."

He waved away Riesling's objections before they could begin. "I do not believe that you are transporting Russians out of Russia for your own enjoyment. So if the KGB catches you, they question you, a little torture, perhaps . . ." He shrugged expressively. "In the end, they trade you for one of their own spies. Not so bad, eh? But if they catch Saarinen, he hangs. So peace, yes?" He held up the bottle in salute.

Riesling drank thoughtfully, his eyes never leaving the Finn. Saarinen smiled. "Well, we're only young once. My men will take you as near to Vyborg as possible—in Finland, that is."

Well, at least that was something, Riesling thought.

But not much. It meant he was apparently going to be deposited near a heavily guarded Russian border station and left to his own devices for getting into the Soviet Union and out again with the premier Russian chess champion and his wife.

"Unless you want us to turn around and go back," Saarinen said, as if reading the American's mind. "As far as the dock